



Part of the Flight 93 Temporary Memorial, Somerset County, Pa.

Photo by Brian Butko



# 9/11

## Collecting and Commemorating a National Tragedy

By Nicholas P. Ciotola, Curator



On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four passenger airliners and used them as aerial weapons against the United States, killing thousands of innocent civilians, destroying millions of dollars of property, and ushering in a new era in American history.



Squeegee handle used by Jan Demczur to escape along with five others from an elevator in One World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

Smithsonian photo by Richard Strauss



Airplane fragment found in the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

Smithsonian photo by Terry McCrea

Much like Sunday, December 7, 1941, that fateful Tuesday was instantly recognized as a day of tragedy and resolve as well as a seminal date in history that would not soon be forgotten. Almost immediately, the heinous images of death and destruction conveyed to the American populace on television induced reactions that ran the gamut of human emotions. Many people wept. Others prayed. Outraged and angry, still others sought revenge. For many individuals, solace came in the form of introspection, discussion, and the posing of questions – many of which, it soon became evident, had no easy answers. Who carried out the nefarious attacks? What motivated the perpetrators to despise the United States? Did years of American intervention bring about the attacks? Or were they carried out by inherently evil individuals jealous of the freedoms offered by American life? Why did the U.S. government have no advance knowledge? What degree of military retaliation, if any, would be a justifiable response? Perhaps most importantly, what must be done to prevent such attacks from ever happening again?

For the American museum community, a different question arose in the immediate aftermath of September 11. How should museums, as repositories of the past, document an emotionally-charged event still transpiring in the present but that would one day have tremendous historical significance? Led by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, a consortium of museums and historical organizations gathered in the days after September 11 to ponder this very question. Though acknowledging the need for sensitivity to the families of the victims, those involved in the discussion unanimously agreed that the greater museum community was indeed obligated to collect and preserve the material culture of September 11.

The United States Congress echoed this sentiment by designating the National Museum of American History as the official repository for September 11 – an action that led to a sustained, grassroots effort to collect artifacts illustrating the tragedy. Pieces of

Page 15: This scorched eagle finial from an office flagpole was recovered from the damaged offices of the Pentagon.

Smithsonian photo by Hugh Talman



Courtesy of Father Joseph McCaffrey, site photo by Coleman Bates, Jr.



As the official chaplain for the Pittsburgh Division of the FBI, Father Joseph McCaffrey (wearing this jacket) consoled special agents working at the Flight 93 crash site and greeted families of the victims as they arrived in Shanksville. His rosary beads offered solace to those needing spiritual guidance in a time of tragedy.



Found in the wreckage of the Flight 93 crash site in Somerset County, these charred and broken seatbelts provide a somber glimpse into the final moments of the 40 passengers and crew members who lost their lives on September 11.

Courtesy of National Museum of American History, Behring Center

twisted steel from the World Trade Center and broken chunks of the Pentagon's limestone facade illustrated the sheer magnitude of destruction wrought by the hijacked planes. Mayor Rudy Giuliani's cell phone and a bull horn used by President George W. Bush showed the role played by local and national politicians in comforting Americans in the time of crisis. Dirtied and damaged firefighter helmets and police uniforms called attention to the heroism shown by those who rushed to help others with little regard for their own lives. The end result of this active collecting initiative was *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*, a historical exhibition that opened at the National Museum of American History in 2002. Having traveled to venues across the continental United States, the exhibit will inaugurate the History Center's Smithsonian Gallery on Saturday, September 11, 2004 – the third anniversary of the terrorist attacks.

Although the entire nation felt the effects of September 11, certain geographic regions suffered its direct impact. In the weeks after the attacks, parishioners at churches throughout Westchester County, Staten Island, and northern New Jersey were constantly reminded of the tragedy as memorial services were held for the hundreds of suburban commuters and rescue personnel who perished. The impact on New York, however, was perhaps best embodied by the New York Times heart-wrenching obituary series that chronicled the lives and untimely deaths of the victims. The content of these moving portraits revealed how the tragedy in New York did not discriminate – those who perished were young and old, black and white, foreign- and native-born, rich and poor.

In Northern Virginia, meanwhile, people mourned the loss of friends and loved ones by setting up temporary memorials near the west face of the Pentagon – the wall struck by American Airlines Flight 77. Further, heightened security procedures at governmental buildings, historical sites, public transportation stops, and elsewhere in the nation's capital meant that Washingtonians would be subjected to a continual reminder of the legacy of





Shannon McKruit of Eureka Fire Rescue (Tarentum, Pa.) wore these rescue helmet during volunteer work at Ground Zero. Upon arriving in New York on September 12, McKruit and other Eureka volunteers were assigned to FDNY engine 235. Its original crew from Brooklyn had perished in the collapse.



Photograph by Eureka Fire Rescue volunteers at Ground Zero, gift of Eureka Fire Rescue

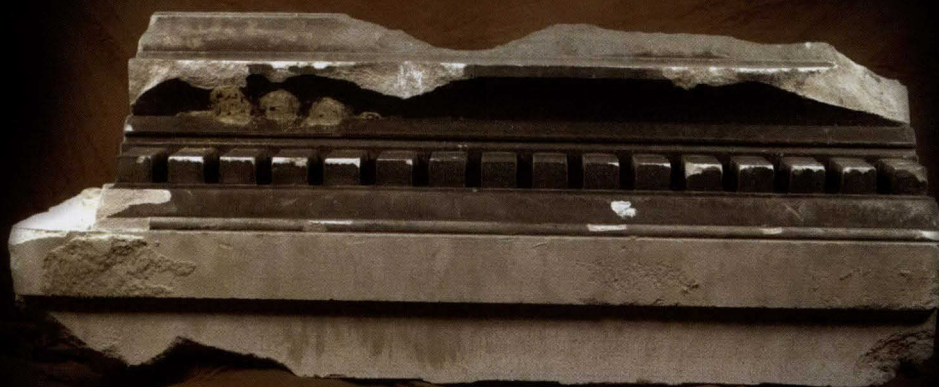
September 11. Others needed no such reminder as it was they who lost relatives, friends, or co-workers in the Pentagon blast.

Like New York and Washington, D.C., Western Pennsylvania felt the direct impact of September 11 due to the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 in Shanksville. Departing from Newark International Airport, Flight 93 spent most of its short, ill-fated flight path in Pennsylvania skies. As the hijacked vessel careened over Somerset County on its way towards Washington D.C., passengers gallantly rushed the cockpit and attempted to wrest control of the plane from the four hijackers. Shortly thereafter, the plane crashed in an abandoned strip mine near Shanksville. Local emergency personnel including fire departments, EMT crews, and the Pennsylvania State Police rushed to the scene but found no survivors. In the nearly three years since that fateful day, thousands of Americans have visited a temporary memorial overlooking the crash site, leaving behind stuffed animals, flags, buttons, t-shirts, religious medals, artwork, and other personal items in remembrance. A barren swath of land in Western Pennsylvania – like Cemetery Hill at Gettysburg, Lexington's Battle Green, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. – is now hallowed ground.

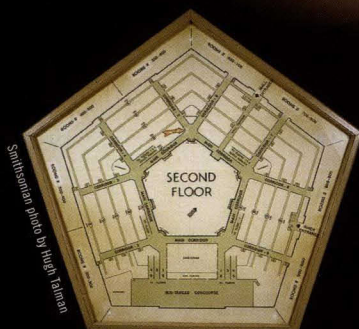
The exhibition *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* brings together a small but poignant collection of artifacts that chronicle the impact of September 11 on New York, Washington, D.C., and Western Pennsylvania. A squeegee handle used by a trapped window washer to escape from a World Trade Center elevator, clothing worn by individuals who helped pull Pentagon survivors to safety, and memorial offerings left at the Flight 93 crash site are only a few of the many objects comprising the exhibition. These artifacts convey the heroism of many, the tragic demise of others, and the tremendous resolve demonstrated by the American people in overcoming one of the darkest days in recent history. Designed to stimulate an array of emotions, the objects that comprise the



Courtesy of National Museum of American History, Belting Center. Photo by Hugh Talman



Limestone fragment from Pentagon façade



This Pentagon corridor map hung on the second floor of the innermost "A" ring, close to where the hijacked airplane hit the building.

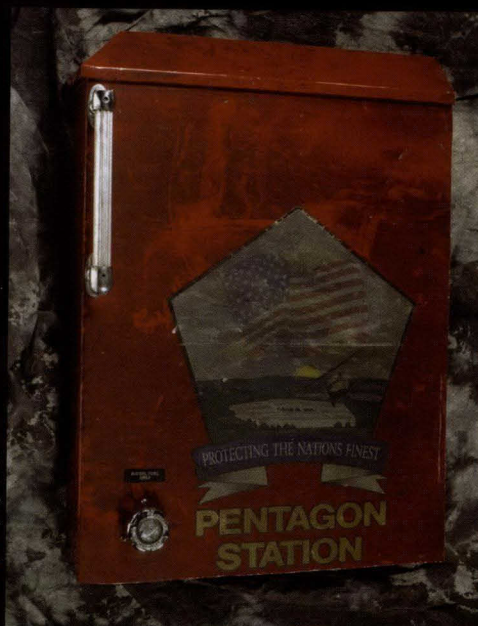
A door panel from a fire and rescue truck operated by Fort Myer Fire and Emergency Services, Pentagon Station, which was parked near the point of impact and partially destroyed by the blast.

This fused clump of presentation coins and a fire-scarred medallion were recovered from the damaged offices of the Pentagon.

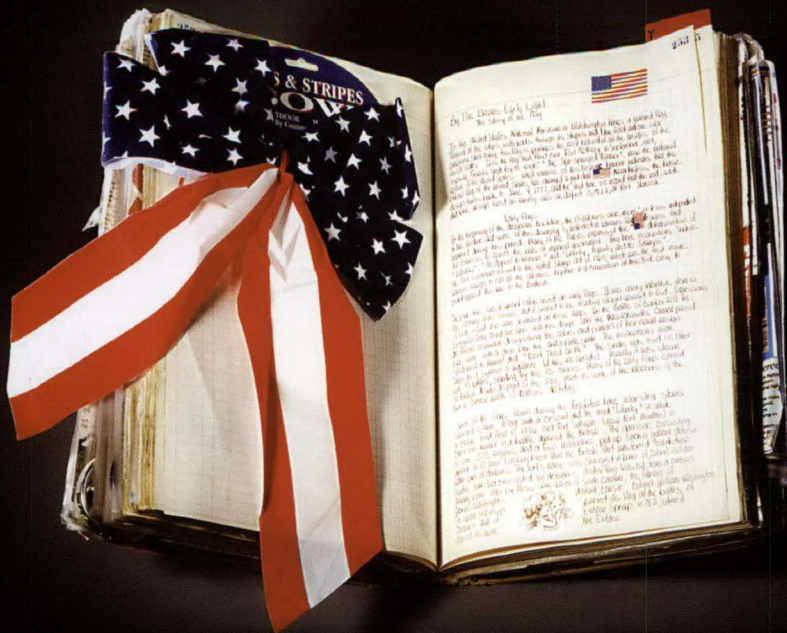
Smithsonian photo by Patrick Brown



Smithsonian photo by Hugh Talman



Smithsonian photo by Richard Strauss



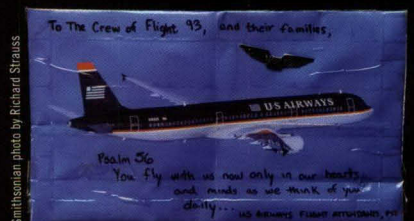
"The Ledger," a September 11 scrapbook composed by Michelle Guyton of Mobile, Alabama.

Teddy bear, softball and flight attendant's sign are memorial offerings left near the Flight 93 crash site in Somerset County, Pa. Memorial offerings on loan from the County of Somerset, Somerset, Pa.



Bullhorn on loan from President George W. Bush. Smithsonian photo by Hugh Talman

Bullhorn used by President George W. Bush to speak to recovery crews at the World Trade Center site on Sept. 14.



Smithsonian photo by Richard Strauss







All items courtesy of Paul Fogle and Patricia Brown

exhibition also encourage people to contemplate the question of what September 11 meant to them. The historical legacy of September 11, after all, can only be fully understood by looking into the hearts and minds of those who lived through that day.

In order to establish the Western Pennsylvania connection to September 11, the History Center is augmenting the Smithsonian's exhibit with artifacts illustrating how the lives of people from our region reacted to and remembered the terrorist attacks. Few people know, for example, that Pittsburgh-area EMT and fire department personnel rushed to New York City upon hearing of the attacks and were actively involved in relief and recovery operations at Ground Zero. Closer to home, the Pittsburgh branch of the FBI assumed jurisdiction over the Flight 93 crash site in Shanksville. FBI special agents from our city and region, therefore, faced the pressing task of securing perimeters, scouring the wreckage, consoling family members, planning memorial services, and recovering evidence for the investigation. Western Pennsylvanians also emerged as active participants in efforts to commemorate September 11 through various forms of artistic expression including sculpture, drawing, video, and song.

These pages contain some of the most evocative artifacts that comprise the original exhibit and the History Center's local component. In addition to commemorating the lives of those who died and honoring the ones who survived, these powerful objects – and the stories that they tell – illustrate the American museum community's ongoing effort to collecting the national tragedy of September 11. ☀

McKeesport paramedic Paul Fogle wore this gear as a volunteer at Ground Zero. He and other members of McKeesport-based White Oak Rescue drove their ambulance to New York immediately upon learning of the terrorist attacks. They assisted local officials there with recovery operations.